

## **THE REALITY OF FUTURE CENTERS IN EUROPE**

Hank Kune

Future Centers are special working environments that help organizations and people break out of patterns and routines, see issues from multiple perspectives, and choose effective courses of action. They are high-touch, technology-enhanced learning spaces, which enable people to create, develop, prototype, and communicate ideas, strategies, plans, solutions and actions that help them to:

- deal effectively with today's challenges;
- achieve middle- and long-term goals;
- deliver sustainable solutions and results.

A Future Center is an organizational, physical, methodological and virtual space. It is a mental space, an affective space, and above all a people space. It exists across time, moving between past, present and future as it navigates knowledge and experiential pathways to achieve its objectives.



### **The Reality of Future Centers in Europe**

At present there are more than 30 Future Centers in Europe. They assume different forms in different places, and in different organizations they are known by different labels – innovation labs, creativity centers, mindlabs and diverse organization-specific names. Some operate in public administration and others in multinational industries; there are corporate centers and centers open to the general public, centers serving geographical areas and specific domains.

They operate in various domains, for a range of purposes. Looking at public administration, there are Future Centers operating at ministerial level in national government, in cities, and in regions. They operate in

governmental and semi-governmental agencies dealing with economic affairs, taxation, transportation, public works and water management, nature and the environment, spatial planning and urban revitalization, social affairs and

employment, pensions, the welfare system, and education. There are Future Centers bridging the work of four ministries (in the Netherlands), and centers working for three ministries (in Denmark and in the UK). In Israel and the Netherlands there are centers working to improve the quality of education in school systems. In several countries, studies are being performed and/or plans drawn up for centers in provincial government, in NGOs, and as public private partnerships.

In the private sector, a variety of sectors have company-specific versions of Future Centers: post, telecommunications, energy, consumer electronics, insurance and banking. A number of consultancy organisations – both large and small – operate their own Future Center-like initiatives on a commercial basis.

A further distinction can be made between centers created around a permanent physical space, and those that create temporary dynamic *future space* on-site, at the location where its users live and work, or where the issues it deals with actually occur.

What unites them is a common focus on dealing with real people and real issues in organisations and society. They are all centers for facilitated collaborative problem-solving, where people seeking new ideas, new directions, and sustainable real-time answers to complex problems can bring their questions, issues and ideas. They provide the means to leverage the collective intelligence – and distributed intelligence – of relevant organizations, sectors and communities, in order to apply this intelligence to tackling specific organizational issues and societal challenges. The core competences of Future Centers – developing people-friendly and “brain-friendly” working environments with optimal user-centricity, developing and investigating future perspectives, creating prototypes for policy options, and engaging in multi-stakeholder dialogue which leads to action – impact the effectiveness of organisations to meet the present – and future – needs of their customers and governments to deal pro-actively with present and future societal challenges.

Different perspectives on Future Centers are valid, and that’s why the European Commission’s *OpenFutures* project explored Future Centers from a range of perspectives: the perspective of their organization and management, their physical space, their technologies, and their methods. Applying a variety of perspectives broadens our horizon; according to Skandia Future Center “perspective is worth 50 IQ points”.

New Future Center initiatives are reported every month: a variety of organizations in government, business and the academic community are investigating how they can make use of Future Center concepts to create, share and apply knowledge in practical activities which enable them to work

The screenshot shows the OpenFutures website interface. At the top left is the 'OpenFutures' logo. To the right is a world map composed of green pixels, with several red dots indicating the locations of future centers. Below the map is a 'NEWS' section with three articles:

- 2007-06-20 Review meeting in Brussels**: Open Futures next review meeting will take place in Brussels, on the 30th of July. All workpackage leaders will be represented. [Read more »](#)
- 2007-05-15 The Guimaraes Event**: Open Futures are proud to collaborate with and have an active role in the Guimaraes event. [Read more »](#)
- 2007-01-30 Open futures in UnBla 2007**: 3 partners of Open Futures participated at the 2007 UnBla conference in Lucern. [Read more »](#)

Below the news section is a 'Newsarchive read more' link. At the bottom of the page are three video thumbnails with captions:

- WHAT ARE FUTURE CENTERS?**: Future Centers are facilitated
- VIDEOSTREAM**: A short film on future centers has
- WHAT IS OPEN FUTURES?**: Open Futures is a team of people

more effectively, serve their customers better, operate in a future-oriented manner and better achieve their objectives.

### **Future Centers as innovation environments**

Future Centers are facilitated working environments, collaborative workplaces where learning and insights from past and future, and from diverse participant perspectives, are applied to solve real-world problems in the present. They are innovation engines to help people and organizations collaboratively, systematically and continuously explore, anticipate, prepare for and actively design the future – and then return to the present to realize it.

Future Centers support their users and clients with facilitated activities in physical, virtual, cognitive and emotional space. They are user-centric, people-centred working environments purposely designed to enable users to collaborate in thinking about, questioning, designing and prototyping the future. They facilitate organizations to create innovative solutions to issues that matter to them by prototyping new policy, products, services and work relationships. They provide dedicated working environments, methods, tools, facilitation, and the appropriate context for furthering organizational, technological, social and societal innovation.

*How do they work?* By adding intelligence to the work that people, projects, and organizations perform: visual, emotional, spatial, creative and collective intelligence. They do their work by asking questions, challenging assumptions, and not accepting easy answers; by helping people – and organizations – to let go of habits, work with multiple perspectives, create multiple options and multiplier effects, consider their consequences, and take responsibility for their actions and decisions. Despite the 'future' label it is the conscious linking of past, present and future that is actively pursued. In the search for added value, the present serves as departure point, the past as a cradle, and the future as an asset.

### **Functions Future Centers fulfil in organizations**

Future Centers can fulfil a variety of functions in their parent organizations. Most fulfil several functions, and particular centers actively organize their activities to fulfil a number of these functions in an *integrated way*:

- **Innovation.** Facilitating and enabling innovation (continuous, radical, disruptive) in diverse ways.
- **Meeting and networking space.** They provide meeting and encounter sites for people: a low threshold-meeting place for people and ideas, both internal and external, that is always surprising and inspiring. This function is *not* about holding meetings; in fact, most Future Centers are adamant about turning down clients who simply wish to hold meetings in an unusual setting.
- **Future orientation.** Facilitating conversations about the future and its consequences: creating future images, perspectives and scenarios and through them, impacting the future of people, their parent organization(s), and society.
- **Knowledge creation.** Facilitating the co-creation, sharing and implementation of new knowledge – and turning it into value.

- **Prototyping.** Creating fast, testable prototypes of ideas and products, work processes and policies, which can be tested with end-users. The Future Center is an incubator and testing ground for new ways of working, communicating and thinking, and for potential solutions to challenging problems.
- **Talent development.** Helping people to develop new types of leadership for innovation, and practice skills needed to effectively address the future.
- **Education.** Imparting new skills, attitude, and working methods to individuals and organizations using it.
- **Anchoring results.** Anchoring results achieved in the Future Center: in the center itself, in the parent or client organization, in the sector and in society.

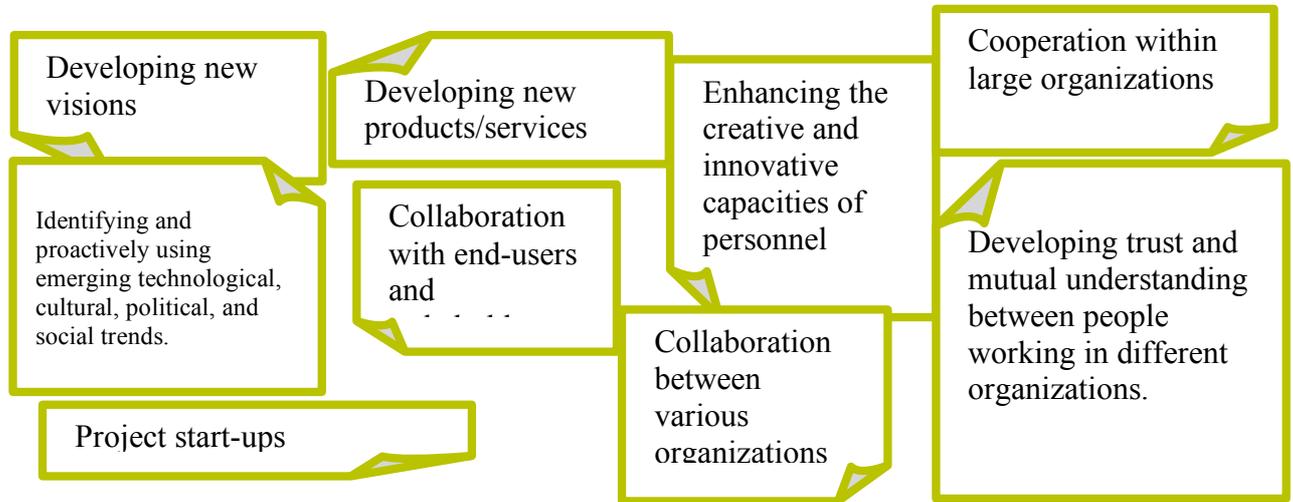
A central function that many Future Centers fulfil is ***creating and facilitating new ways of working with people on issues that are important to them and their organizations.*** In essence, they take people out of their standard working practice, and provide a new way to organize the knowledge, resources and activities required to achieve the desired outcomes. Centers create working methods based on their operating principles and key competencies, designing them to deal with specific issues, and use them to facilitate the process of moving *from thinking to doing*. As such, this also offers a way for session participants to learn how to organize work effectively. People practice new skills, acquire new competencies, and can bring them back to their regular workplace. These skills and competencies can then be more widely applied and influence the way work is organized throughout the organization.

In practice, organizations use Future Centers achieve a variety of process objectives:

- use space to create desired effects: mind setting, comfort and discomfort zones, challenge zones, joy zones, safe havens and so forth;
- enable group dynamics and understand how people react in diverse situations;
- focus work in different stages of the innovation process;
- stimulate entrepreneurship;
- stimulate creativity;
- help people enter into possible futures (futurizing);
- learn from the past (pattern recognition);
- learn from the present (contextual mapping);
- learn from the future (scenarios, anticipatory learning);
- apply practical knowledge-management insights to individuals, projects and organizations;
- report on intellectual capital;
- apply sustainable development principles to organizational issues;
- allow people to meet each other as individuals, not functionaries or representatives of organizations;

- work with different generations, and involve children in working on issues that impact the future.

### Future Centers deal with diverse issues



In addition, there are content-specific questions relating to particular issues in the sectors where Future Centers operate. Content-specific issues of transportation, taxation, insurance, energy, education, water management, pensions, and employment are the focus of a sizable percentage of the activities organized at their respective centers.

### OpenFutures

In May 2006, fourteen innovation experts started a unique two-year exploration tour in which they explored Future Centers and other future-oriented working environments. They visited, experienced, analyzed and prototyped over thirty Future Centers: in the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, the United Kingdom, Italy, Israel and elsewhere.

The explorers were part of the OpenFutures project, which was funded by the European Commission. They examined Future Centers from four perspectives: the organizational, physical, methodological and technological. The insights, stories, knowledge recipes and recommendations are summarized in the book *OpenFutures – an Operating System for Future Centers*. It is a highly visual document, which provides insights into why Future Centers are set up, how they are managed, run and renewed, and how they provide value.

It is available through the project website: [www.open-futures.net](http://www.open-futures.net)

### FCA: Future Center Alliance

FCA is an alliance of master practitioners in the art and practice of creating, running and supporting Future Centers. The goal of the Alliance is to promote the effective realization of the Future Center concept in diverse domains. The eight core partners are experienced professionals working in the field of social and societal innovation, intellectual capital and collaborative workspace design. Their work ranges from academic and action research to hands-on problem solving in practice.

FCA partners created and ran the world's first Future Center at Skandia in the 1990's. They are responsible for convening and leading the first two International

Future Center Summits (2005 in The Netherlands and 2006 in Italy) and are currently organizing a 3rd Summit (2009 in Sweden).

FCA partners served as the management team of *OpenFutures*, the European Commission's Future Centers project (2006-08), and alliance members formed the core group of this project.

Alliance partners leverage their core expertise, complementary skills, and extensive networks to collaboratively achieve client objectives. They advise on and support public sector renewal and private sector innovation in a dozen countries, and have actively participated in the development of Future Centers throughout the world.



The FCA is preparing a website to serve the international Future Center community. It can be accessed at: [www.futurecenters.eu](http://www.futurecenters.eu).

Information about new developments and the coming Stockholm Summit will be available there.

## Resources

- Dvir, R. (editor) *OpenFutures – Operating System for Future Centers (2008)*. Published by OpenFutures (European Commission Project)
- Edvinsson, L. (2002). *Corporate Longitude*. Pearson Education Limited, Edinburgh
- Kune, H. (2008) *Future Centers: Environments where Innovations Emerge*. METI: Tokyo
- Kune, H. (2005), *Future Centers: Ruimte voor innovatie*. (XPIN: The Hague) (English title: *Future Centers: Space for Innovation*)
- OpenFutures website: [www.open-futures.net](http://www.open-futures.net)
- Work in Progress (2006). Video. *Kosterbok, Kune, Meines, Van Dijk (Het Buitenhuis, The Hague)*

*Hank Kune is director of Educore bv in The Netherlands, and one of the founding partners of FCA: the Future Center Alliance.*

*He can be contacted at [hankkune@educore.nl](mailto:hankkune@educore.nl)*